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Abraham Lincoln

An address before the Illinois Society of Oakland, California by
JOHN T. BELL

Along a country road in Kentucky, a woman and a little girl riding horseback, the horses also carrying various articles of household effects; trudging beside them, afoot, a man and a little boy. The husband and father of this household never learned to read or write, and when the lad reached the age of twenty-one his own education was limited to the ability to write, read and do simple sums in arithmetic. Thus this family—unknown, illiterate, poor among the poor—journeyed toward a new home in Indiana, the bulk of their small worldly possessions having previously gone forward by flat boat.

There was nothing of note about this scene; doubtless it was common enough in that locality in 1816, but that little boy, dressed in a jeans suit that his mother had made, a hickory shirt, and barefooted, came to be the best known and best loved man in all the world; to write State papers which now command the admiration of the most scholarly and cultured; to make, on the occasion of the dedication of the Gettysburg National Cemetery, an address of two minutes' length which has been characterized as setting the high-water mark of American oratory; to serve this great Nation as its Chief Executive and conduct it safely through four years of the bloodiest war the

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world has ever known; to strike the chains from four million bondsmen; to die a martyr to human liberty; to be honored by a funeral procession sixteen hundred miles long and to be mourned by millions with the sincere grief which marks a personal bereavement.

Two surprising things occurred in the month of June, 1860—the holding of a national political convention at Chicago, then a town of only 109,200 population on the western border of the well-settled States, and the nomination by that convention of Abraham Lincoln, a country lawyer of Illinois, whose only title to fame, outside a very limited circle, rested upon a series of eight joint debates held with Stephen A. Douglas two years previously.

This nomination was received with dismay by the people of the North and with derision and sneers by those of the South. Thoughtful men who loved their country realized that so grave was the crisis then impending that the highest order of intellect, the clearest vision and the most profound judgment combined with courage and fortitude of the most exalted character, would be required by the Nation of the one who was to become its Executive on the Fourth of March following.

What an appalling task it was which confronted this modest, unassuming, sad-eyed man from the prairies of the West when he reached Washington February 23, 1861! So thoroughly permeated with disloyalty was official life at the Nation's capital at that date that he could not place his hand upon a single individual, high or low in station, and say: "Upon you I can rely." Inexperienced in statecraft; with but slight acquaintance with the leaders of his own party; surrounded by those who received him coldly or with open expressions of contempt; seven States already seceded, with the certainty that others would

follow; the entire military force of the country consisting of only 20,000 men; the few ships comprising the navy scattered abroad; an empty national treasury—surely, surely, never before was burden so heavy placed upon the shoulders of man as that which Abraham Lincoln took up when he stood on the eastern portico of the Capitol and solemnly dedicated himself to the service of his distracted country.

Nine days after Mr. Lincoln's arrival at Washington the Nation was electrified by an inaugural address the equal of which had never been penned. Courtly gentlemen and polished scholars had preceded this homely man in his high office, but never before had the people of this continent been so touched and thrilled on like occasion as they were by President Lincoln's first inaugural, and it will ever stand a model of logic, of clean-cut statement, of patriotic fervor, of sympathetic regard for misled people, of cogent reasoning, of winning persuasiveness.

Then followed, for this simple-minded man, four years of unprecedented experience; of mental and physical strain; of gleams of sunshine; of days of gloom; of victories won; of disaster and defeat; of messages of cheer; of vicious assault; of confidence expressed; of coldness and distrust; of official jealousies; of bitter antagonisms; of bloody sacrifices; of treasure wasted; of battles ill-planned and lost; of fraud and corruption; of exalted heroism; of cowardice and treachery; of agonized appeals from fathers and mothers and little children in behalf of loved ones perishing in prisons; of death in his own household—the mere reading of the record of those four dreadful, dreadful years fills one with amazement that this tender-hearted man should have lived through an experience so crushing.

We know that there were times when his soul cried out for relief. A friend of former years attended one of the Presidential receptions and afterward related that Mr. Lincoln paid little heed to the great throng, including persons of the highest distinction, pressing forward to take him by the hand. After the reception rooms of the White House were cleared the President took his friend's arm and the two walked up and down in silence. A remark was made upon Mr. Lincoln's evident depression, whereupon he grasped his friend fiercely by the arm and exclaimed: "What day is this? What day is this? This is Friday; this is the day they shoot farmers' boys down on the Potomac for going to sleep on sentry post! My God, I can't endure it! I can't endure it!"

With his keen sensibilities, his loving heart which took in all mankind, his feeling of close kindred with the common people, what a shock it must have been to him to be asked to approve the findings of courts martial imposing the death penalty upon Union soldiers. At such times he took advantage of every possible pretext for withholding his endorsement. On one occasion, in granting a pardon to a deserter, he said: "It makes me feel rested after a hard day's work if I can find some good excuse for saving a man's life, and I go to bed happy as I think how joyous the signing of my name makes him and his family and his friends." Upon being asked to sign the death warrant of twenty-four deserters, he replied: "There are already too many weeping widows in the United States. For God's sake do not ask me to add to the number, for I won't do it." On another occasion of this character he said: "I think the boy can do us more good above the ground than under it." An application for the pardon of a deserter was presented to him in a case where the soldier had

previously displayed distinguished courage on the battlefield. "Did you say he was once badly wounded?" he asked. "Then, as the Scriptures say that in the shedding of blood there is remission of sins, I guess we will have to let him off this time."

In his relations with others he was always considerate and forbearing. This was shown in a marked degree in his intercourse with Gen. McClellan during an entire year of disaster, and appalling sacrifices, bringing the country to the verge of ruin. After the bloody battle of Fredericksburg was fought by Gen. Burnside (who succeeded McClellan) the leading officers of the army of the Potomac were in a demoralized condition. By appointment, at midnight, December 31, 1862, Gen. Burnside met Mr. Lincoln at the White House and a long and anxious conference followed. Then the President wrote to his military adviser, Gen. H. W. Halleck, requesting him to visit the army of the Potomac in its camps, investigate the situation, confer with the officers and then to direct Gen. Burnside to move forward, or direct him to remain where he was. "If you fail me in this," wrote the President, "you fail me precisely where I feel that I have a right to rely upon your military judgment." On the back of this paper, now on file in the War Department, is this endorsement in Mr. Lincoln's handwriting, under the same date as the paper itself, January 1, 1863: "Withdrawn, because Gen. Halleck thinks it is too harsh."

General Halleck did not render the service then asked of him, but remained in Washington. Gen. Hooker succeeded Gen. Burnside, fighting the battle of Chancellorsville, which was almost as disastrous to the Union as was that of Fredericksburg, and was succeeded by Gen. Meade, who commanded at the battle of Gettysburg.

In the midst of the disappointments and perplexities of the first two years of the war, what a comfort it must have been to Mr. Lincoln to look across the country to his own loved West to the operations of the army commanded by an officer to whom President Johnson was wont to refer, in later years, as "that little man Grant"; who had always obeyed orders, had never complained though often treated with the grossest injustice by his immediate superior, General Halleck, who never asked for re-inforcements and who never lost a battle. Grant was one after Lincoln's own heart, and when the modest, unassuming man from Galena, Illinois, stood before the modest, unassuming man from Springfield, Illinois, on March 9, 1864, in the White House, to receive his commission as Lieutenant-General and commander of all the armies of the United States, what a blessed feeling of relief it must have brought to the overburdened heart of the President to know that at last he had found a man who would lift from his own shoulders a great part of their burden.

Ours is a Christian Nation and Abraham Lincoln was a Christian President of that Nation. Beginning by asking the prayers of his fellow citizens at Springfield when he bade them good-bye on starting to Washington, he expressed, on every suitable occasion, his reliance upon God. In all of his State papers, in his correspondence, in military orders, in congratulatory addresses, fitting reference was ever made to the power of the Almighty and confidence expressed in His goodness, justice and mercy in dealing with this people. On the eve of the battle of Antietam, in September, 1862, he promised his Maker that if victory should come to the Union arms he would issue a proclamation abolishing human slavery in the rebellious States, and this promise was followed by the immortal

Emancipation Proclamation, which took effect January 1, 1863. Speaking of the battle of Gettysburg, he said to General Sickles: "In the stress and pinch of the campaign there I went to my room and got down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for victory at Gettysburg. I told Him that this was His country and that the war was His war, but that we really couldn't stand another Fredericksburg or Chancellorsville, and then and there I made a solemn vow that if He would stand by the boys at Gettysburg, I would stand by Him, and He did, and I will."

We can take great satisfaction in knowing that President Lincoln lived to see the Civil War practically ended; that he walked the streets of the late capital of the Confederacy surrounded by black men and women and children who, with streaming eyes, sought to touch the hand or kiss the garment of one who was, to them, God's own instrument and direct representative; that he heard from the lips of the Great Captain the story of General Lee's surrender, and that he received the heartfelt congratulation of the people of the Northern States over the approaching end of his great task.

In a Chicago paper was printed an illustration of the marvelous growth of that city. Beginning with a mere speck to typify the population of seventy persons in 1830, a little larger dot illustrates that of 4,479 in 1840; then the figure of a pigmy is employed to indicate the relative size of the population ten years later, the pigmy increasing in proportion as the decades pass until, with the census of 1896 showing a population of a million and three quarters, a great giant stands as the representation of this later period. So may be illustrated the life of Abraham Lincoln. Begun in obscurity, in direst poverty, a youth passed

under conditions tending to debase rather than to elevate, with no encouragement from those about him to gain an education or improve his condition, he slowly grew as the years went by, developing the worthier qualities of human character and bravely meeting every responsibility, until, finally, he stood before the world, the noblest man this earth hath known since the Savior of mankind put off mortality.

“Heroic soul, in homely garb half hid
Sincere, sagacious, melancholy, quaint;
What he endured, no less than what he did,
Hath reared his monument and crowned him saint.”





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